

Voices of vanishing worlds

A new project is recording and making accessible the endangered oral literatures of indigenous peoples before they are lost forever.



Recitation of oral texts by Latte Apa, senior ritual practitioner of the Thangmi community, Darjeeling, India

The World Oral Literature Project has recently been established to support the collection of oral literature by funding, training and working with local communities and fieldworkers who are engaged in documentation projects.

For many communities around the world, the transmission of oral literature from one generation to the next lies at the heart of cultural practice. These creative expressions may be ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, folk tales, songs, word games, life histories or historical narratives. However, globalisation and socio-economic change exert complex pressures on smaller communities, eroding expressive diversity and transforming

culture through assimilation to more-dominant ways of life. Of the world's 6,000 natural languages, as many as half will probably not survive for another generation. As vehicles for the transmission of unique cultural knowledge, languages are repositories of oral traditions that become threatened when elders die and livelihoods are disrupted.

Dr Mark Turin, who leads the project, which is associated with the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, explains its importance: 'It's often the vernacular traditions of communities living on the margins of nation states that are most at risk. By supporting communities to document their own cultures for the

future, and through working with engaged and committed scholars, our project is responding to this urgent challenge.'

With initial funding from the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Onaway Trust and the Chadwyck-Healey Charitable Trust, the first phase of the project is under way. A digital repository of oral literatures from around the world has been launched, as has the first tranche of supplemental funding for fieldwork projects, including the recording of folk music of Lo Monthang, Nepal, and ceremonial chanting in the Vaupés Region of Colombia. A training workshop at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) will run in December, bringing together scholars, indigenous researchers, curators and archivists.

In a remarkable cross-disciplinary research collaboration, the project is also working with zoologist Bill Sutherland, the Miriam Rothschild Professor of Conservation Biology at Cambridge, to develop a consolidated database on endangered cultures, languages and ecology at a global level. 'While the World Oral Literature Project has been forming in our minds for some time, only by collaborating with colleagues and coordinating resources and expertise can we hope to document the voices of these vanishing worlds,' explained Dr Turin.

The pilot project is currently seeking sustainable long-term funding to make it a permanent fixture in the University's research agenda.

For more information, please contact Dr Mark Turin (mt10003@cam.ac.uk) or visit www.oralliterature.org/

Open Access in Cambridge

The University of Cambridge's first Open Access Week will enhance knowledge and understanding of the Open Access phenomenon.

The Open Access movement worldwide has been gathering pace as top-tier universities embrace the effort to provide free online access to research literature and data. To support understanding of Open Access, the University Library is organising a number of events in October during the International Open Access Week. The events are built around DSpace@Cambridge (www.dspace.cam.ac.uk/), the University's institutional Open Access repository.

'Increasingly, research funding agencies and universities are viewing Open Access as an effective way of

ensuring the greatest possible impact for the research they fund,' explained Barbara Bültmann, DSpace's Support and Liaison Officer and one of the organisers of the conference. 'All seven UK Research Councils expect research they support to be available on Open Access and the majority of UK universities have institutional repositories like DSpace@Cambridge to provide



managed environments for sharing their digital research output.'

Open Access literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions. By publishing in Open Access journals, or through placing copies of material in Open Access repositories, authors maximise their research impact and increase the visibility of their data, which are then used, cited and built upon, ultimately furthering the research itself.

Find out more about Open Access by visiting one of the events in Cambridge during the first International Open Access Week on 19–23 October 2009 (www.lib.cam.ac.uk/create_change/events.html).